



The Medical Detectives

Berton Roueché

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This is a classic collection of 25 true narratives of medical investigative reporting by award-winning journalist Berton Roueché. Readers of "The New Yorker" may be familiar with the author's suspenseful tales of strange illnesses, rare diseases, poisons and parasites.

The Medical Detectives Details

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Author : Berton Roueché

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From Reader Review The Medical Detectives for online ebook

Chloe Lessard says

Berton Roueché's writing is unparalleled in the realm of nonfiction medical narratives. Unlike so much of science writing involving outbreaks, his work brims with technical details integrated well enough to inform the reader and inspire curiosity. You finish every story feeling like you've learned something, which might not attract a general reader with little interest in epidemiology. At times, he overuses long quotes and dedicates a page or two to the ramblings of a subject, but it's clear from the sections that are purely Roueché that he was meticulous researcher and master story crafter. (Also, his uncanny access to CDC researchers and physicians? WOW.)

Gloria Piper says

This is an odd mixture of clinical and folksy writing. Medical terms are unexplained while the most elementary terms are presented in great detail. Roueché captures our interest with true cases and the history behind diseases and their treatment. Not all diseases are caused by bacteria, viruses, fungi, or parasites. Some are caused by poisons or improper nutrition. The author covers the entire spectrum, giving an example of each.

He presents us with a case of rabies, its treatment, and its history, which is rather wild. We learn why rabies was also called hydrophobia, which is an aversion to water. How was this aversion handled in the past? One example was to toss the victim into the water until he was forced to swallow water and supposedly cured. There is the tragedy of mercury poisoning, the amusing story of the orange man who had his own ideas about nutrition, and the puzzling story of the poisonous tomatoes.

It's easy to care for the afflicted in these cases, and we are gratified by each follow-up. Here is good reading for the medical student or for those who are simply interested in human diseases.

Nina says

What a great book! Roueché was a writer for the New Yorker, covering medical mystery stories. This book was suggested to me by Maggie Merman, a doctor in Atlanta whom I rotated with when I was a medical student. I'm so glad I had written it down and then thought to order it when I ran across it online a couple of years ago. Fabulous stories about all sorts of medical mysteries: the blue men, an orange man, a case of rabies, a case of a boy poisoned by his blue jeans... It's fascinating to see how the epidemiologists traced the cases. Also, Roueché has a funny, almost poetic way of describing certain things. His descriptions of ticks and of the rabies virus are great. I was thrilled reading through the book to run across several people I knew who were interviewed and were characters in the stories - among them, Dr. Phil Brachman my thesis advisor in public health, Dr. Jonas Shulman from Emory, and others. The stories are written in lay terms, so they are each to follow.

Daniel says

Great book! A little worrisome, given that now I think I will have some horrible disease and no one will know what it is, but other than that I loved it! Every now and then I thought his style was a little confusing, in that vast passages of the book are just quotes from various doctors on the case — not that this was a bad thing, but that it was sometimes confusing to remember, after 5 or more pages, which of the ten doctors that were involved with the case was speaking. But, despite this, it was a very engaging read, whether because of fear of disease, or just in general. It reads like a mystery, almost, and some of the stories are mysteries about what a disease is, and others are about where a disease came from. I tried to solve it along with the doctors, to a small degree, which of course was hopeless since I do not have anywhere near their knowledge, but still it was exciting and fun.

Aamil Syed says

This was a wonderful read because it presented medical facts and histories of diseases and their epidemiology in an incredibly accessible manner. It's not easy to make non fiction enjoyable, more so when you're writing about the gruesome subject of disease! But Berton Roueché does a splendid job of that.

The cases have been written in the manner of detective stories and make for really riveting reading. The stories I liked the most was that of Rabies, mass hysteria and of course, typhoid Mary.

Arnab Sengupta says

An excellent book regarding real medical mysteries. It is written in an interview format, which makes the stories more realistic. The cases presented in the book are really fascinating. Definitely try it if you are a bit into medicine or biology!

Dave says

One of my favorite books from childhood--it's very old-fashioned (when's the last time you thought of Farrah Fawcett-Majors as a current fad?), and medically/socially out-of-date, but most of these essays still have the thrill of a good episode of *House* (note: it's never Lupus). Some of these I believe *were* episodes of *House*. Heroes are not the doctors (who are basically good and pragmatic, occasionally wry), or the patients (who are confused, pathetic, simply drawn)--it's the group procedural detective work, and the wonderful, *New Yorker*-style editing. Some favorites: "Eleven Blue Men," "Two Blue Hands," "Sandy"--but all are good like chocolate.

Simone says

This book is thrilling, suspenseful and definitely well written: both scientifically accurate and understandable to the general public, there is no need to have a medical degree to understand and enjoy it. All the 25 medical investigations kept me interested, some more than others.

Reading this book felt like watching episodes of the popular tv-series Criminal Minds, where an elite group of investigators analyze the nation's most dangerous serial killers to catch them before they strike again. The

main difference here is viruses, bacteria and poisons instead of human serial killers.

The book was written in the 80s, so some of the medical information is probably outdated now, but it did not really matter to me, since my favorite part of the book was the medical investigation: identify a disease, find the source of an outbreak and control any possible wider spread. I also enjoyed learning about weird and uncommon diseases.

I wish i could find other science books as good as this one.

Linnae says

Stories you'll want to tell someone else about! (Though maybe not over dinner...)

A compilation of 25 different unusual medical cases. A handful are presented as the doctor trying to figure out what could be causing certain symptoms, but with most, the disease is known and it's up to epidemiologists to track down the specific cause along with who else might be affected--or infected, as the case may be.

* * * * *

Somewhat uneven writing between chapters, with some very slow and tedious to get through (particularly the chapter about aspirin) and others high interest to the end. Since they span decades, I suppose it was to be expected. I ended up retelling many of the stories to my kids. They clamored for more! In fact, my 8-year-old picked it up to read on his own, but got bogged down a chapter or two in. I guess you can tell there's a strong medical influence in our home!

Also, always wash new clothes before you wear them. Just...do it. Please. Thank you.

I blog at: www.ofbooksandblooms.com

Isha Ali says

I went to a lot of trouble to find this book and it was all well worth it. It was a very interesting and sometimes suspenseful read. Some of the cases were easy to guess. Before I read this book I didn't think that epidemiology was a particularly interesting field of medicine (in my defense my only knowledge of epidemiology is from a few episodes of Chicago Med and an epidemiologist who taught us community medicine and put us to sleep), but this book certainly changes that. It was fascinating. Since it was originally published in 1980 some of the medicine is a bit outdated, but it also provides a historical perspective into some diseases and treatments, which is a win win. If you are into medical mysteries like in House MD, I definitely recommend.

David says

Updating this rating to 5 stars (January 6th, 2008), because it was one of the five best books I read in 2007.

This "classic collection of award-winning medical investigative reporting", published in 1988, is an excellent book. Each of the 25 case studies originally appeared as an "Annals of medicine" piece in the New Yorker, and there's not a dud in the bunch. It's like 25 "House" episodes, but without the gratuitous obnoxiousness, condescension to the reader, or the ridiculous constraint that only a limping, misanthropic painkiller addict can be right.

I found these essays much more satisfying than those in the Oliver Sacks collection I also sampled over the weekend ("An anthropologist on Mars"). Not sure why, but there is something about Dr Sacks that rubs me the wrong way - at the very least, I'd be happier if he cut all his chapters by 50%, I don't find his ruminations nearly as fascinating as he apparently does. I suspect I'm in the minority on this one, as each new collection of his seems to receive universal acclaim. Furthermore, to be fair, the possibility has to be acknowledged that my vague "I do not like thee Doctor Fell" reaction to Sacks can be traced back to nothing more than damning him by association with Robin Williams. Because didn't Williams portray the Sacks-figure in "Awakenings"? After which there are just two words left: PATCH ADAMS

Note to self: strive to be a less shallow person in 2008.

In conclusion, Roueche's "The Medical Detectives" is an awesome collection. 25 fascinating case studies, each concisely and elegantly presented. 4.5 stars.

Karen says

After watching House M.D., I decided to do some reading about medical mysteries. This is a great collection of essays that features a broad array of medical problems that took a while to diagnose.

Dr.Nouf AlKaabi says

This book have changed my idea about epidimiology. For someone like me, who loves sherlock holmes, Agatha christie and every detective and detection story, this book was the best ever. Although it was written along time ago but I found it to be usful and it helped me a lot. planing to read it again, and more than that, to study it.

Aleta Sullivan says

This book provided much of the content for House, MD , the first seasons. House, MD fans will recognize the anthrax from insulation case.

Mike says

I'm no PhD holder, so a lot of this was over my head and a bit drawn out. Roueche does a good job of describing the uniqueness of a lot of these situations but for a regular schmoe like me it holds interest half as well.

For those in the medical game I could see this book being a wild world of entertaining patience and guessing while they are figuring out rare diseases and such. For the regulars out there, prepare to be somewhat lost but interested enough to keep reading.
